

13. Intelligence Agencies

Q. Mr. President, when you came to office there was a lot of criticism of the intelligence agencies, about the methods they were using, and now since the Iran thing there's a good deal of criticism, it seems, about their evaluation. How concerned were you about the intelligence evaluations in Iran? And could you give us a general comment about what you think the state of the intelligence arts is today?

A. I've said several times that one of the pleasant surprises of my own Administration has been the high quality of work done by the intelligence community. When I interrogate them about a specific intelligence item, when I get general assessments of intelligence matters, I've been very pleased with the quality of their work.

Recently, however, I have been concerned that the trend that was established about 15 years ago to get intelligence from electronic means might have been overemphasized, sometimes to the detriment of the assessment of the intelligence derived and also the intelligence derived through normal political channels. Not secret intelligence, sometimes just the assessment of public information that's known in different countries around the world.

And recently I wrote a note — which is my custom, I write several every day — to the National Security Council, the State Department and the C.I.A. leaders, and asked them to get together with others and see how we could improve the quality of our assessment program and also, particularly, political assessments.

Since I've been in office we have substantially modified the order of priorities addressed by the intelligence community in its totality. When I became President I was concerned, during the first few months, that quite often the intelligence community, itself, set its own priorities as a supplier of intelligence information. I felt that the customers — the ones who receive the intelligence information, including the Defense Department, myself and others — ought to be the ones to say this is what we consider to be most important.

That effort has been completed. And it's now working very well. So, to summarize, there is still some progress to be made. I was pleased with intelligence community's work when I first came into office and it's been improved since I became President.